TIME
8 AUGUST 1977

SHAPING POLICY WITH THE BIG FOUR

"We're just sitting on our asses," Jimmy Carter barked into his Oval Office telephone. On the receiving end, Vice President Walter Mondale listened patiently. Though both men had been in their jobs for less than three months at the time, the President was irate that few new U.S. initiatives toward Africa had been undertaken. Within several days, he sent U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young and Mondale winging their way, verbally and physically, through the continent, where they followed the Carter policy of denouncing white racism and supporting black majority rule.

The incident illustrates several facts about the way the Administration shapes foreign policy. First, the President is firmly in charge of it. Second, he is impatient in his determination to influence world events, sometimes moves swiftly before all the ramifications of the action are thoroughly explored. Third, he relies on several officials, rather than a single Kissinger-like superstar, to carry out his ideas.

Each Friday morning when all are in town, Carter breakfasts with his top two experts, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski and Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, as well as Mondale. The Big Four linger over coffee for up to two hours as they mull over an agenda of issues prepared by Vance.

Most of the topics are of immediate concern, such as the trips this week of Vance to the Middle East and Young to the Caribbean. Yet the four attempt to keep a broader perspective. Says one participant: "We try to look down the road to where we hope to be four years from now."

A secondary quartet of foreign policymakers consists of Young, Defense Secretary Harold Brown, Arms Control Director Paul Warnke and CIA Director Stansfield Turner. The two circles overlap in ways that increase consultation and give and take. Brown, for example, lunches each week with Brzezinski and Vance, and he is highly regarded in the White House, says one official there, as "a lot more than just a spokesman for the generals and the military-industrial complex." The outspoken Young has his own special relationship with the President, who pays close heed to his opinions and has no regrets about the way Young has publicly expressed them. Warnke's incisive views on arms control have far more impact than has been usual for an arms negotiator.

Beyond all this high-level and often informal chatter, there is a formal policy machinery that is also put to full use. Under Vance, the State Department bureaucracy is far more a part of the action than it was under either Secretary of State William Rogers or Kissinger. Vance asks not only Warnke to sit in whenever he discusses arms control with Soviet Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin, but Leslie Gelb, who heads the department's Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, is also deeply involved in SALT. No steps in Carter's troop-reduction plans for Korea are taken without consulting Richard Holbrooke, Assistant Secretary for East Asia and Pacific Affairs. The longtime career diplomats at State also have more influence. Philip Habib, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, is with Vance in the Middle East, and will accompany him later to China. George Vest, a 30-year State veteran, is Assistant Secretary for European Affairs and is significantly helping to coordinate Soviet-American relations.

Vance has his own unique means of influencing the President: a daily four- or five-page "Secretary's evening report." Dictated at the end of each working day to his personal assistant Elva Morgan, it summarizes Vance's impressions of the day's events, calls Carter's attention to forthcoming activities in U.S. missions abroad, often seeks his approval to proceed. Carter gets a hand-delivered copy by 8 p.m., reads it thoroughly and returns it at noon the next day with marginal comments, sometimes even a wisecrack. Vance, in effect, puts the President to bed with an evening report, and Brzezinski awakens him with his daily face-to-face assessment of the world's situation.

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Both men have gone out of their way to avoid any appearance of a power struggle. Neither has the temperament of Kissinger, who was contemptuous of Rogers and ultimately gained both jobs. Vance and Brzezinski have worked together easily for years in the New York "foreign affairs community" and in previous Washington jobs. They phone each other ten to 15 times a day. On Vance's phone console right under a red button labeled J.C. is one labeled BRZEZINSKI.

Vance, Brzezinski and others in the top group have had what Brzezinski says are "very sharp and sometimes intense arguments" over policy but have shown that "we can work as a team." Vance is skeptical about the wisdom of a meeting between Carter and Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev unless it is linked to progress toward a new SALT agreement; Brzezinski favors a summit just so the two leaders can get to know each other. While Brzezinski helped develop Carter's emphatic policy on human rights, it was Vance who came back from his harsh treatment in Moscow last March and urged Carter, as one White House source recalls, "to impose some order on the human rights policy." In general, Vance is the practical diplomat who carries out policy, and Brzezinski is the in-house idea man.

Apart from his proximity to the President, Brzezinski's advantage lies in his role as top man at the NSC, which funnels information to Carter from all the departments involved in a foreign policy decision. This process often takes the form of a Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM), which the NSC, after consultation with other departments and the President's approval, can request on any topic. The NSC usually designates one agency to take the lead in preparing it, then Brzezinski and his staff supervise the final drafting. If everyone concerned approves the draft, it goes to the President. When there is a dispute between agencies over a PRM, the NSC hears out the dissent, with Carter presiding over the session. Once a PRM is approved, the President's signature turns it into a directive for action. So far, more than 30 PRMs have been prepared, covering such topics as SALT, the Middle East, nuclear proliferation, China, human rights and the Soviet posture in the world.

While the top team defers to Carter when formulating policy, members do speak frankly—and make little jokes. Carter and Brzezinski play doubles tennis opposite each other two or three times a week. One afternoon Carter's side had won the first set, 6-5, and the second set was tied, 6-6, when rain ended the match. Brzezinski frowned. "What's the matter?" Carter asked. Replied Brzezinski: "I wanted to beat you." Said the President: "Well, don't feel too bad. After all, you win most of the semantic matches around here."